

PROTECTING THE HEALTH OF YOUR WOODLAND

All woodland owners would like to have a healthy forest. Healthy forests are able to withstand or recover from insect and disease outbreaks and extreme weather conditions. Healthy forests are sustainable and provide stability to the soil. They also provide habitat for wildlife and many microorganisms that play an important role in the food chain. Healthy forests come in many varieties, and forests are constantly changing. How can you tell if your forests are healthy?

You can monitor the health of your woodland by simply getting to know them better. Walking through the woods at the same time each growing season, preferably in June or July, when most important stress-related symptoms occur, can provide you with a “snap shot” of the health of your forest. You can even establish areas or grouping of trees, scattered throughout your woodland to visit each summer and look for signs of trouble. There are three key symptoms that indicate a problem may be brewing in your woodland.

- Step back and view the silhouette of your tree’s crown. If there are dead branches sticking out of the upper part of the crown, this is a sign that there may be problems.
- See how much sunlight is filtering down to the forest floor. Is there an extraordinary amount of light coming through the crown because leaves are missing? If the crown is missing leaves, you may have an insect in your woodland that is eating the foliage, or a fungal disease that is infecting the leaves and causing them to fall prematurely.

- What color are the leaves or needles? Are they yellow or perhaps even tan or brown? Leaf and needle color are related to the soil condition, and can warn of problems such as soil nutrient imbalances, soil compaction, root diseases or stem cankers (sores).

Remember that a healthy forest is not free of insects, diseases, dead trees and yellow leaves. Some insects serve as food for birds, and fungi are necessary to recycle wood into soil. Dead trees provide habitat for birds and small mammals and a wide range of insects. Sudden changes such as a dramatic increase in dieback, transparency and foliage color should alert you to seek assistance in diagnosing the health of your woodland.

What can you do? The best methods for protecting the health of your woodland are tied to following a management plan that gives your trees adequate sunlight and moisture to grow. Recommendations for management of insect and disease outbreaks should take an integrated approach that mixes the removal of diseased, dying and dead trees, the use of chemicals to manage insect populations, modification of your woodland to favor tree species that are resistant to these pests, and creating habitat or conditions that favor their predators allowing nature to manage these pests for you.

To learn more about protecting the health of your woodland, see the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource’s Forest Health Protection website at <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/Forestry/FH/index.htm>.

9

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